

Sowing the Seeds, Reaping the Harvest

(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on May 28, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

It is back-breaking work, walking along the furrows,
Sowing the seeds of next season's crop.
With the rain comes the little sprouts, borne of earth,
Full of promise for the coming year.
Just as the crop grows tall and days move toward harvest,
So, also, grows our confidence about days ahead.
Such is life; we sow seeds today, that we may
Reap a good harvest tomorrow.
It is in the spirit of harvest, and future's promise,
And the good will that all here share,
That we light our flaming chalice this morning.
May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Sowing the Seeds, Reaping the Harvest

Reverend Michael Walker

Most of us are far removed from our farming ancestors and the cycles of the seasons, but I hope we all understand the metaphor of sowing seeds in the springtime and reaping the harvest in the fall. So it is with congregational life and so much of our personal lives, as well – that we plant the seeds of a plan at one time, to reap the benefits (or not), later on.

Because I'll be leaving in a few weeks, I want to share with the congregation some of the things I've learned in my time here. Today, we will explore this church's development as a religious community and

consider how it helps people on their various spiritual journeys. We will consider our work together in what we often call the “**Five Interim Tasks**,” which are:¹

1. *Coming to terms with history*
2. *Discovering a new identity*
3. *Allowing needed leadership to emerge*
4. *Renewing denominational linkages, and*
5. *Committing to new directions in ministry*

In the sermon today, I'll paraphrase descriptions of interim ministry work from the UUA's Janus Handbook, used by interim ministers throughout our denomination.

In the recent years of interim ministry in Harrisburg, I believe we have learned several lessons and experienced many successes you can build upon. We have engaged in a collaborative ministry that has allowed

¹ *Janus Workbook*, (UUA, PCD & PNWD, 2007), p. 3.

new lay leaders to emerge and take on roles that serve the community as a whole, and has helped the church staff to more accurately define and focus their work. We (lay leaders, board, staff and myself) have co-created, and in fact continuously co-create, a supportive and justice-seeking community in an atmosphere of care and curiosity, spread across two campuses. We hold each other in times of need, and we help one another find our way in our individual searches for truth and meaning.

Our first interim task: **come to terms with history.**

It was important to *claim and honor the church's past and heal its griefs and conflicts*,² as well as celebrate your successes and honor the gifts of time and talent

² Ibid.

brought by many dedicated church members and friends.

To claim the past and to work towards healing conflicts in your history, they must be described. We have reaped what we sowed, even when the result was not what we expected nor was it good for us. I'm talking about a couple of incidents in the church's past that continue to affect congregational life today, and I'm also aware that bringing them up may be painful for some.

One incident that looms large in the church's story about itself is, of course, the purchase of the Market Street building, and all the many things said and done leading up to and since that time, 8 or 9 years ago. There were dreams that have not come to fruition. There were plans made that may not have been approved by all, and instituted without much group process to determine if

these plans were right for the congregation. We might say, a storm spoiled the crop before it could be harvested.

Another incident, two years ago, was the unsuccessful effort to call settled co-ministers. This difficult experience was a shock to many, and was the reason why I was asked to come and minister here. Your search committee worked very hard and they were naturally heartbroken when it all fell apart. Following this, I heard from many who feel it's time to move forward and yet, the long interim period has caused some to feel that the church is in a perpetual state of transition. Which is true. The point being that it becomes difficult – not *impossible*, just *difficult* – to make long-term plans during a transitional period. We try to sow seeds for our future success, and hope that they grow and can be

harvested later.

For example, last year, several lay leaders worked on promoting a healthy congregation, leading a process that a great many of you participated in. Elsewhere in church life, the Board and I worked on the operations and administration of the church, streamlining so that we can come closer to living within our means – as much as is possible, right now. At other points, some of our members planned and hosted fun, social events. The last example of this I'll share is something I've come to admire about our choir. Last summer, choir members and musicians gathered to discuss the future of the music ministry at UCH and I was particularly touched with how those folks developed a plan to unify the choir, leading the congregation by example, hoping their example

would help to unify the whole church. They came upon this idea themselves, with no prodding from me – and I have to say that I believe they’ve been fairly successful in reaching that goal.

Despite history and past hurts, many people tell me how important this church is to them. I also see you having fun together, and otherwise feeling hopeful as you look towards the future. A good harvest, indeed.

Our second interim task: **discover a new identity.**

Numerous leaders in the church have helped us to *illuminate the congregation’s unique identity, strengths, needs and challenges.*³ Part of our identity, which is not unique – we share it with most UU churches – is that we

³ Ibid.

are a haven for people with progressive values, a keen sense of what is just and equitable for all, not just for a few, and compassion for ourselves and others. What makes us unique is that we do all this through programs at two campuses, including an inner-city ministry that many other UU churches have avoided. Of course, this has also presented this church with a unique set of challenges, particularly how to be financially sustainable while supporting the upkeep of two campuses.

Discovering a new identity seems to have been an elusive goal for many years. There were those who believed that a new mission to serve the people of Allison Hill was in alignment with the church’s commitment to social justice and racial equity. And, there were those who felt that keeping the retreat setting

of the Clover Lane campus was in alignment with our environmental, pastoral, and other congregational goals. But, missing for all these years was a congregation-wide consensus about the church's identity.

For this we have sown many seeds. Several things happened over the last couple years to address these divergent visions, to consider new visions and new possibilities, and to make the church financially sustainable. One was to sit down with leaders from the Boards of both the church and the nonprofit organization, Gather the Spirit for Justice or GTS, and create a new understanding of how these two organizations relate to each other. Part of this was, honestly, to push the fledgling out of the nest and convince them to fly on their own. I know this is controversial for some people, but

the new agreement has caused GTS to step-up their fundraising and hire their own staff, rather than relying on church staff, which we could no longer afford. We had to do this, and I truly believe that our new understanding of the relationship between UCH and GTS has been of benefit to both organizations.

Another thing we did was to reduce duplication and cut the church staff by half, so that there was one Minister, one Music Director, one Director of Religious Exploration, and one Congregational Administrator. When I arrived, there were at least two of each.

The church Board of Trustees took on the role of looking at new ways of operating, also to be sustainable. They sowed new seeds by creating the Multi-Site Task Force, whose duty was to research all the different ways

in which multi-site churches operate. The task force developed and presented a proposal to the congregation about a plan that would be supportive of our values and goals, while also being financially sustainable. The harvest was that they ended up proposing what has been called the Market Street (or Chalice Center) Plan, which the congregation approved a year ago. This plan calls for underutilized rooms in the Market Street building to be prepared for leasing to other nonprofits that share our values and do work on Allison Hill. Progress has been made on this plan, but there is still more to do.

Another visionary plan – sowing seeds now to be harvested sometime in the future – was adopted last week. In this plan, we committed to increasing event rentals at Clover Lane, which became the justification for

approving funds for patching the parking lot and installing air-conditioning in the CL sanctuary, both of which are long overdue. The point is that the Board and I recognized a need, and the congregation agreed in the Annual Meeting, to increase streams of revenue beyond the pockets of our members, which are only so deep.

These plans are designed to allow the church to do the work it needs to do in our community, and not over-extend itself in the process. In fact, once these plans are well underway, we will reap the harvest and give members, trustees and staff, the opportunity to focus on the *other* reasons people come to church, rather than focusing on finances and fundraising all the time. I mean, how great would it be, if everyone could come to church for music and worship, personal improvement

through religious education, as well as family and other social events to get to know each other better? Doesn't that seem like a better way to do church? More fun?

Our third interim task: **allow new leadership to emerge.**

A challenge during interim ministries is how to *clarify the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and navigate the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition.*⁴

I can think of several groups and lay leaders in the church who have stepped up, given of their time and talents, and served this church community. There are many examples, but I will name only a few, due to time. I've already mentioned the Multi-Site Task Force and its

⁴ Ibid.

many months of work to develop the Market Street Plan. I've also mentioned the Choir, in his efforts to unify the congregation by leading by example. Since I arrived, we have also re-envisioned how we develop worship as a team. In fact, we created a Worship Team, as well as appointing lay leaders to coordinate the Lay Liturgists, rather than asking the Music Director or me to do that.

Another beautiful program that was born during the last couple years, which I've been honored to help and support, but which has been largely led by members of the church, is what the Covenant Group Ministry program, formerly known as Small Group Ministry. This program emphasizes the covenantal nature of the groups, as a group spiritual practice. No, this is not just like COUCH groups – this is supposed to be something new

and different. These groups allow folks to experience a defined spiritual practice, contemplatively reflect on a range of topics, while also developing closer relationships with others in our church community.

Our fourth interim task: **renew denominational linkages**

Throughout our time together, as we've been immersed in all of this holy work, we have also been *renewing connections with available resources within and beyond the UUA*.⁵ Perhaps this one is not quite as exciting, but I think of help from consultants as the metaphorical fertilizer for our crops... After we sow the seeds, we need to water and fertilize them, so they grow and we can later harvest them.

⁵ Ibid.

Anyway, when I first arrived, the Healthy Congregation Task Force was working with a UUA consultant, Mike Harris, and set up sessions to listen and learn from many of you, to promote healing from some of the past hurts that I described earlier, and to inject fun back into the life of the church.

Later, the Multi-Site Task Force and I consulted UUA staff, Revs. David Pyle and Joan Van Becelaere, who provided invaluable information about how other churches with multiple locations have been making it work. And most recently, the board, the church, and now your new Ministerial Search Committee have worked with a UUA Transitions Coach, Rev. Bruce Marshall.

I lift all of this up because it is very important to remember, or to realize in the first place, that the

Unitarian Church of Harrisburg does not operate in a vacuum. We are part of a larger movement of Unitarian Universalists around the world. We do not have to figure out everything by ourselves, because there are experts elsewhere that can provide us with valuable information, if we don't already have the resources we need to figure this or that out. We are not alone and we don't have to re-invent the wheel all the time.

Our fifth and final interim task: **commit to new directions in ministry.**

As we approach the conclusion of this ministry, it seems to me that we have *enabled the congregation to renew its vision, strengthen its stewardship, and prepare for new professional leadership, while also preparing to*

*engage your future with anticipation and zest.*⁶

Let's not forget that! Through this long interim period, which will continue for a fifth year, you have matured as a congregation, healed from past hurts and learned to celebrate the glory of life together again. We have renewed UCH's vision of how to promote our progressive values and direct our justice-seeking efforts. In short, UCH is prepared to engage your collective future together.

As the work of this church continues over the next year, I encourage everyone to support all of the work that will be done by your next Interim Minister, the Board of Trustees, and especially your Search Committee as they look for the next minister that will be a good fit for all the

⁶ Ibid.

complexity that is the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg.

I also encourage the members and friends of UCH to support the stewardship efforts of this church, because wise ones inform us that we must build the future we wish to have – we must plant the seeds we wish to harvest – and that means supporting the work of this church even during times of transition. Another way of putting that is that you want to make the church look as attractive as possible, for new members, for yourselves, and for your future settled minister.

As we conclude our time together this morning, let's recall the “**Five Interim Tasks**,” which are:⁷

⁷ Ibid.

1. *Coming to terms with history*
2. *Discovering a new identity*
3. *Allowing needed leadership to emerge*
4. *Renewing denominational linkages, and*
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In the midst of all that, I've witnessed a church that is seeking ways to thrive, meet the needs of diverse peoples who cross our thresholds, and promote a greater love in our surrounding communities. May your future years be full of hope; may you be held in grace and love; and may you do all the good you can in the Susquehanna River Valley and beyond. May you reap all that you sow, in all the best ways possible.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Though our days *together* grow short, please know this:

I wish, for the future, a growing understanding of
our responsibilities to Earth and all its people.

I wish, for this church, success and growth.

I wish, for each of you, much happiness.

Let that be our prayer, as we go out today:

Let us promote communication and understanding.

Let us work for peace, justice, and compassion.

Let us create joy and try to bring happiness to all.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
